

CHAPTER ONE

'Sorry Business is Yapa Way': Warlpiri Mortuary Rituals as Embodied Practice

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This paper is about contemporary Warlpiri mortuary rituals performed immediately after a death has occurred, called 'sorry business' or simply 'sorry'.¹ The data on which this paper is based is primarily derived from research at Yuendumu (a settlement of approximately eight hundred Warlpiri speakers, located 300 kilometres northwest of Alice Springs), as well as from participating in sorry business at a number of other Warlpiri settlements throughout the Tanami Desert.

In late 1998, I began doctoral fieldwork at Yuendumu with the aim to research everyday settlement life by looking at mobility and residence patterns. I specifically

¹ At Yuendumu, these mortuary rituals are entirely separate from funerals. The latter, at Yuendumu, are held after sorry is completed, often weeks or months after a death occurred. The social and structural organization of funerals is entirely different from that of sorry business. Funerals are held at the local church, accompanied by a Warlpiri-led religious service, and are restricted to certain relatives of the deceased, while all other residents must avoid the settlement (and the presence of the dead body) until the participants return from the burial which these days takes place on the deceased's traditional country and formerly at the cemetery. Funerals, more so than sorry business, currently seem to be undergoing some changes. This may possibly be in response to experiencing practices in neighbouring non-Warlpiri settlements (for example, Papunya, Mt Allan, and Balgo, see McCoy for the latter in this volume) where many aspects of sorry seem to have been incorporated into funerals. In those settlements, funerals and sorry are not separate rituals and hence funeral attendance is very high. Correspondingly, in recent years, funerals at Yuendumu have had larger attendances, including one funeral I attended where the real and classificatory mothers of the deceased were present (albeit demarcated from other attendants by clothing and seating arrangements), something formerly unheard of.

intended *not* to focus on ritual. When I arrived at Yuendumu, people asked me what I had come to do and I explained I wanted to learn Yapa way, the way in which Warlpiri people live and think about life. In that case, I was told again and again, I had better go to sorry. ‘You want to learn Yapa way, you go to sorry’ I was told, and ‘sorry business is Yapa way’. I was hesitant at first to participate in mortuary rituals, not only because this was ritual after all, but also because I thought it was not my place to do so, considering that it involved people grieving the deaths of people I often did not even know. Nevertheless, following the requests of the people I was living and working with, I came to regularly participate in sorry, driving my Toyota as part of large convoys to sorry business at other settlements, staying in ‘sorry camps’, and helping people in those camps with water, firewood, and transport. Only retrospectively did I realize that my Warlpiri co-residents and myself actually spent about a third of our time involved in sorry – underscoring dramatically the fact that today, Warlpiri communities experience so many deaths that sorry business is now an elemental everyday experience, or, as people say: ‘sorry business is Yapa way’.

The contemporary situation contrasts starkly with earlier reports, for example, from those of two key anthropologists who worked with Warlpiri people before me, Nicolas Peterson (I refer here to the work he did with Warlpiri people in the early 1970s) and Mervyn Meggitt (who worked with Warlpiri people in the 1950s). Neither witnessed mortuary rituals during their fieldwork – because nobody passed away when they were there (Meggitt 1962, 317; Peterson pers. com., 2002). Accordingly, their analyses of Warlpiri life and Warlpiri ritual differ from mine. Meggitt only briefly discusses mortuary rites, relating them to the life-cycle and the roles and responsibilities of matriline. In his comparative study of ritual in the Central Australian desert and the

tropical Top End, Peterson concluded that Warlpiri ritual had an explicit focus on fertility while people in Arnhem Land concentrated more on the management of death, seeing these emphases as reflective of their contrasting ecological zones:

Unlike the Murngin clan rituals, those of the Walbiri do not focus on death but on fertility. [...] The concern of desert ceremonies with fertility would appear to correlate directly with the environmental differences between Arnhem Land and the desert (Peterson 1972, 22).

Speaking of Pintupi people, who live just to the south of Warlpiri, Myers (1986) makes a similar point. Contrasting Yolngu organization of structured alliances with realities in the desert, he says ‘among Western Desert people, social attention to temporal continuity in terms of mortuary, clan structure, or even the reproduction of alliances is insubstantial’ (Myers 1986, 295–6). These assessments of mortuary rituals and their significance to the structural organization of ritual, social, and everyday life need to be reappraised in the light of contemporary realities.

The dramatic change from the infrequency of mortuary rituals during Meggitt’s and Peterson’s fieldwork (in the 50s and 70s) to the chronic occurrence of sorry business during my own fieldwork (since 1998) frames this paper. My particular concern lies with the impact of high death rates and consequent increased frequency of sorry on contemporary Warlpiri sociality, Warlpiri personhood, and Warlpiri bodies. In illustration, I compare certain elements of sorry with other Warlpiri ritual; and transcending the analysis of Warlpiri ritual in particular, I engage with some strands of the anthropological literature on mortuary rituals more generally. In regards to the latter, I focus on the roles and meanings of grief and joking in sorry. I begin with a short description of my first experience of sorry, and precede my discussion with an outline of the structure of contemporary Warlpiri mortuary rituals.

First Sorry

Early in 1999, news reached Yuendumu that an old man at Willowra (160 kilometres to the north east of Yuendumu) was very sick. Some of my closest friends went to Willowra straight away and I did not see them until I arrived in Willowra with the Yuendumu contingent a week later, when the old man had passed away. A convoy of more than 25 cars, trucks and four wheel drive vehicles left Yuendumu in the morning, and we stopped a few times on the way, once to cut *nulla nullas* (heavy fighting sticks), once for lunch, and once so the mourners could apply white ochre to their bodies. It was not until we reached the creek at Willowra that there in the shade one of the women came over to me. ‘You want to go sorry now?’ she said, and applied ochre to my face, arms and breasts; that is how I entered the sorry ground in the midst of my sisters from Yuendumu. Since the man who had passed away had been our classificatory son, we, the Napurrurla (women of a particular subsection)² from Yuendumu, started the ritual by approaching the mothers of the deceased on the other side, that is the Napurrurla who had been at Willowra when the old man passed away. It was in a big *mélange* of bodies of wailing women embracing each other over a bedroll that I caught up with my friends whom I had not seen for a week. Many of them had self-inflicted head wounds, and the white ochre on our breasts was fusing with blood and tears. As we hugged and wailed with each other in turn, often individual wails were interrupted by a quick ‘Yasmine, good to see you’ – and I was very surprised to experience for the first time the intense mixture of grief, sadness, pain, and joking that underlies sorry.

² Warlpiri subsections are a socio-centric system of naming, reckoning kin and country connections. There are eight subsections, each with a male (starting with ‘J’) and a female (starting with ‘N’) form, for example Japanangka and Napanangka. For more specific information, see Wafer (1982), or the vast general literature on subsection systems.

Sorry business is performed when an ‘adult’ Warlpiri person passes away; not for young children, nor for very old people.³ Sorry overrides all other concerns and the announcement of an adult death means that any ritual, work, or other activity will be interrupted immediately. Generally most of the settlement population participates (again, with the exception of the very young and the very old), and the more prominent the person, the more in control of their life they were and the more unexpected their death, the larger participation will be, often involving the populations of a number of settlements. A large sorry business encompasses well over a thousand participants and may span a week and longer. The death of a Warlpiri person sets the following sequence of events in motion (which I here mainly describe from a woman’s point of view).

Announcement of Death

These days, most Warlpiri deaths occur away from Yuendumu,⁴ and a death usually is announced by a phone message which then is passed on from camp to camp following a formula of ‘bad news from X, Y doesn’t have a Z’, for example: ‘bad news from Alice Springs, Napurrurla got no sister’.⁵ From this moment onwards the name of the deceased is avoided in speech and replaced by the word *kumunjayi* (meaning ‘no name’, see also Nash and Simpson 1981). The deceased’s smaller possessions will be burned

³ See also Meggitt (1962, 317–23). Children and very old people are considered to be closer to the *jukurrpa* (the Dreaming) than to the social realm; a state that is labeled *warungka* (see Musharbash forthcoming).

⁴ Contemporary deaths mostly occur in the hospitals of Alice Springs or Adelaide, or in road accidents; and recently with alarming increase through murders in Alice Springs.

⁵ The euphemism ‘bad news’ is exclusively reserved for death, and is never used for anything less serious. Note that ‘good news’ has a much wider scope, being applied to all sorts of situations and events, but interestingly never for the bible (called *pipa*, from paper), as is common elsewhere in Australia.

and his or her camp or house will immediately be deserted and henceforth physically avoided by all people close to the deceased. Such avoidance takes the forms of ducking in cars when driving past, re-routing paths through the settlement, and so forth. Upon receiving the message, women start wailing and walk towards the closest women's camp (*jilimi*) in either East Camp or West Camp, two of Yuendumu's 'suburbs' (see Musharbash 2003 on the spatiality of the settlement).

In the Women's Camp

When arriving in the *jilimi*, women pass from one wailing person to the next, hugging them while wailing themselves, then they sit down and are in turn hugged by later arrivals. White ochre is brought out and ground with water on a flat stone. There are two different white ochres to be used for mortuary and other ritual respectively; the duller kaolin-based *karlji* for sorry and the shiny *ngunjungunju* for other ritual. Each woman applies ochre in an inverted U-shape over her temples and forehead, and most also cover their upper arms and breasts with it. This haphazardly self-applied, dull, white ochre in *sorry* signals differences from other rituals, where shiny ochres in different colours are bound with fat rather than water and are skilfully applied in beautiful patterns to one's body by others (see Dussart 2000 for an analysis of ochres, body designs, and notions of beauty in Warlpiri ritual). In the women's camp, the following real and classificatory relatives of the deceased person cover their whole upper bodies in white ochre and shave off their hair: mothers, mother's mothers and, in the case of a man, his wives, and in the case of a woman, her sisters-in-law (see Glowczewski 1983 for an excellent analysis of the role, meanings, and significance of such shorn hair once it is made into hairstring and circulated). Within the context of the ritual, these women are considered key mourners. On the men's side, these are the

mother's brothers, fathers, husbands and brothers-in-law. Men, however, do not shave off their hair.

First Sorry Meeting

Once these preparations are well under way, people start moving towards the sorry ground at the outskirts of the settlement. There, people sit in four distinct groups waiting for everyone to arrive: men on the eastern side of the sorry ground (in two opposing groups, one to the south, one to the north) and women on the western side, mirroring the men. Associations of east with male and west with female permeate other domains of Warlpiri life as well.⁶

The women sit in groups of eight subsections on each side, with women of the subsection of the deceased's mother at the front. If the ritual takes place on the sorry ground outside West Camp, the mothers sitting to the north (or, if on the sorry ground outside East Camp the mothers sitting to the south) are facing a bedroll.⁷ The ritual begins by the mothers from the other side walking towards the mothers with the bedroll, and, while walking, wailing and hitting themselves on their heads with *nulla nullas*, stones, tins, and so forth. Some women also employ women's ritualized fighting steps, brandishing their *nulla nulla* in front of them. Women from the deceased's sister's subsection direct the walking mothers to the sitting mothers and prevent the worst self-harm. When the two groups of mothers meet, all the women kneel and each woman from the one side hugs each woman from the other side over the bedroll, while wailing.

⁶ To give two examples: in pre-settlement times, men's camps were to the east and women's camps to the west of married people's camps. A polite way of referring to women is to call them *karlarra-wardingki*, literally, 'those belonging to the west'.

⁷ Which sorry ground is chosen depends on the latest residency and/or the country affiliation of the deceased.

Then the mothers who walked over return to their side, and the sisters now direct the next subsection group to come over and wail with the sitting mothers. Simultaneously, the sisters direct the walking mothers back to the side where the other mothers sit, to wail with the next subsection group, until each of the eight groups on the one side has wailed with each of the eight groups on the other side.

Fig.1: Gendered Positioning on the Sorry Ground

[Insert Fig.1 here – landscape]

On the eastern side of the sorry ground, the men also approach each other, albeit in quite a different manner. They use a stylized prancing step, brandishing spears and fighting boomerangs high up in the air. And while women are organized by subsections, men are organized into matriline.⁸ Men's style of wailing is different in tone, rhythm, and pitch to that of women. Their body designs also are quite different; the men's are painted in an extended V-shape, starting on the arms and shoulders and meeting around the navel. Lastly, men's and women's paraphernalia (boomerangs and *nulla nullas* respectively) and self-inflicted injuries differ significantly: women tend to gash their heads and cut off finger joints, while men gash their thighs (see also Meggitt 1962, 319–30).

When all groups on both the women's and the men's side have completed these actions, the spatial divisions between subsection groups and genders dissolve. Warlpiri people do not believe in natural causes of death and every death, for which sorry is performed, must be avenged. Individual women close to the deceased approach the

⁸ At least, that is how it seemed to me from what I could observe while participating on the women's side. This corroborates closely with Meggitt's description of the roles and responsibilities of the matriline during mortuary rituals (see Meggitt 1962, 219-30).

deceased's mother's brothers, now sitting in the middle of the sorry ground, kneel behind them, hug them and wail. The mother's brothers are the ones to avenge the deceased's death and the women's action urges them to do so (see Meggitt 1962, 319–30 and Glowzcewski 1983 for more details on the roles of mothers' brothers during Warlpiri mortuary rituals). Around them, depending upon circumstances, people either leave the sorry ground peacefully – or (and more commonly), violence flares up and people from different families start making accusations and counter-accusations, hitting each other over the head and otherwise attacking each other, while screaming and ducking away from boomerangs flying from all directions. Such fights might be isolated to the particular death or, depending upon the circumstances of death and the relationships between families at the time, they might broaden out and incorporate into them expressions of anger and aggression relating to other fights. Eventually, with the latest occurring at nightfall, fights quieten down for the day and people leave for home or the sorry camp. More often than not, however, the fights flare up again during the remainder of sorry, and in other circumstances, often for years to come.

Sorry Camp

Following the reception of the 'bad news', all residents from the deceased's former camp or house, as well as any close relatives and other classificatory key mourners who lived elsewhere, set up a sorry camp outside the settlement. After the first sorry meeting, more people move into this sorry camp (and more people will join them after subsequent meetings). Residency in sorry camps symbolizes the key mourners' exclusion from normal life, including sexual relations, spatially signified through men's camps being located in the east and women's camps in the west of the larger encompassing sorry camp. Key mourners stay in sorry camps for substantial amounts of

time and their exclusion is not only spatially expressed but in the case of women, also linguistically. This is especially the case for close mothers, wives or sisters-in-law, who use sign language instead of spoken language (see Kendon 1988); they often remain under a speech taboo for weeks to months, and in rare instances, even years.

The Next Sorry Meetings

Depending on the importance of the deceased, the first Yuendumu sorry meeting is followed by a number of sorry meetings with people who arrived for sorry from other settlements.⁹ The structure of these meetings repeats that of the first. This time, however, the division into people from East Camp and people from West Camp is replaced by the Yuendumu population on one side, separated by gender, and the people from the other settlement on the other side. Who is on which side is dependent upon how the two settlements are spatially related to each other. For example, if the next meeting is with people who arrived from Alice Springs, they will be on the southern side of the sorry ground, as Alice Springs lies to the southeast. If the following meeting is with people from Lajamanu, the Yuendumu and Alice Springs people will be on the southern side and the people from Lajamanu on the northern one (as Lajamanu lies to the northwest). This pattern is repeated until all people who have come from different settlements for sorry business are united.

The Last Meeting

At the final meeting, after the last two groups have met and united, the roll of bedding is unfolded and a small parcel taken out of it, called *yampinyi*. It contains the cut off hair

⁹ Note that where one is at the time of death, rather than affiliation with a place, determines one's positioning on the sorry ground in this regard. For example, during the earlier described 'first sorry' at Willowra, those women from Yuendumu who were at Willowra at the time of death were situated on the 'Willowra side'.

of the deceased, also called *yampinyi*. This is first passed around the men. It is held between a man and the next one and they rub against it with their bellies. Then the second man takes it, turns to the third one, and the process is repeated until the *yampinyi* has touched all men. After this, a senior mother's brother of the deceased takes it over to the women and presses it against each woman's breasts or belly. According to Meggitt, the hair of the deceased is then spun into hairstring to be worn by the mother's brothers to remind them to avenge the death (Meggitt 1962, 322; and see Glowczewski 1983 for more detail on Warlpiri hairstrings in these contexts).

Finishing up

At the end of the last sorry meeting, the so-called 'finishing up' takes place. This is performed on the sorry ground and entails activities of redistribution. The senior mothers' brothers of the deceased receive his or her larger possessions, those which were not burnt, such as television sets, trailers, cars, and so forth, to keep or to redistribute among the matriline of the deceased. Ritual 'payments' made up of large amounts of flour, tea, sugar and blankets, are distributed to the mothers' brothers and through them among the mourners (see Musharbash 2003, 169–72 on the redistribution of flour in particular; and Tonkinson this volume on other ritual payments).

Sweeping

The last part in the sequence of sorry business is performed after finishing up, by all the women present.¹⁰ Together, each equipped with a leafy branch, they sweep the

¹⁰ Note that I am here concerned only with those elements of *sorry* that are performed immediately after a death occurred. Other related segments are performed much later. Today, the lifting of death-related taboos (for example, widows' speech taboos, taboos on song segments, and so forth) are often bundled together and dealt with at the beginning of other ritual performances such as the annual initiation rituals (see Dussart 2000 for classifications of Warlpiri ritual).

settlement, focussing on the places the deceased used to frequent, wailing loudly as they do so. All potential footprints the deceased may have left are swept away, thus reinforcing those other practices that render the deceased (and all remnants of their physical being) literally invisible. Note, however, that practices such as replacing the deceased's name with *kumunjayi* not only underscore the process of erasing all traces of the deceased, but also reinforce the loss: saying '*kumunjayi*' instead of the deceased's name requires a conscious re-thinking each time the deceased or anything resembling his/her name is mentioned or thought of. For example, when a woman called 'Kay' passed away, 'K-Mart' was renamed into 'Big Shop', 'KFC' into 'Chicken Place', a boy who commonly was called 'C.K.' into 'Kumunjayi-Boy' and so forth – thus in fact creating a memorial space for the deceased in all sorts of situations exactly *through* avoidance: by saying that 'we stopped at the Chicken Place on the way back from town', one implicitly also says 'Kay is not with us anymore'. The same applies to the new paths people take when walking or driving through the settlement to spatially avoid the camp of the deceased (*yarrkujuju*), and, of course, to the act of sweeping itself. After the sweeping, people who had come from elsewhere for sorry return to their respective settlements while the key mourners return to the sorry camp.

Discussion

I began this paper with a description of my first participation in sorry, sketching 'the intense mixture of grief, sadness, pain, and joking that underlies sorry'. Compare this with Durkheim's declaration that amongst Australian Aboriginal people, which begins with a general note on the relationship between expressions of grief and felt grief:

Mourning is not the spontaneous expression of individual emotions. If the relations weep, lament, mutilate themselves, it is not because they feel themselves personally affected by the death of their kinsman. Of course, it may be that in certain particular cases, the chagrin expressed is really felt. But

it is more generally the case that there is no connection between the sentiments felt and the gestures made by the actors in the rite. (Durkheim 1976 [1915], 442).

Durkheim then moves to a situation not so very different from the one I experienced during my first sorry when whispers interrupted the wailing. Durkheim's assessment, however, critically diverges from mine:

If, at the very moment when the weepers seem the most overcome by grief, some one speaks to them of some temporal interest, it frequently happens that they change their features and tones at once, take on a laughing air and converse in the gayest fashion imaginable. Mourning is not a natural movement of private feelings wounded by a cruel loss; it is a duty imposed by the group (Durkheim 1976 [1915], 442-3).

Durkheim's remarks, no doubt, were influenced by his geographic distance from the events he comments on, as well as the longstanding European tradition of believing ritualized tears to be 'un-emotional' and viewing spontaneous tears as triggered by genuine emotion (cf. Ebersole 2000).¹¹ His remarks delineate one end of the spectrum

¹¹ At times, this distinction has led to almost absurd-seeming debate, as for example in Roth's (1989) critique of Danforth's tears. The latter were shed during his attendance at a funeral in Greece, triggered by thinking of his own brother. His crying made him realize that the 'distance between Self and Other had grown small indeed' (Danforth 1982, 7) and provided the grounds for Roth's objection to the practice of filling cultural space with tears to authenticate ethnography. My question in respect to Danforth's tears shed sitting next to the corpse of a Greek man and thinking of his own brother are: would he consider the distance between 'Self and Other' he describes as grown small through the shared shedding of tears become even smaller if his tears had been shed on behalf of the deceased rather than his own brother?

From a slightly different angle, interesting in this context is a comment made by a Warlpiri man about my tears the night one of my co-residents passed away: '*Yapa-piya Napurrurla, yulami ka*' [She is like a Warlpiri person, she cries]. To him, crying at death was a feature of Warlpiri-ness, no doubt fostered by a lack of experience of non-Indigenous people (*Kardiya*) crying in public. Only very rarely do *Kardiya* participate in sorry, but many regularly appear in sorry camps to give their condolences, to 'shake hands'. Following *Kardiya* socio-cultural mores, this practice generally is conducted with great

along which anthropologists have analyzed mortuary rituals. According to Durkheim (1976 [1915]), mortuary rituals are a socially institutionalized forum for dealing with the threat to being represented by the *idea* of death (see also Bloch and Parry 1982). At the other end of the spectrum, anthropologists have considered that when a person dies, this is not only the physiological fact of a biological individual ceasing to be alive – it has crucial social significances. On this level, the death of a person means that a social being ceases to exist; an act that absolutely and irreversibly ruptures personal and social relations. Rosaldo's (1996[1984]) emphatic critique of anthropological analyses of death was concerned with this: with anthropologists' tendency to occupy themselves with ritual rather than bereavement. In his view, description and analysis of mortuary rites engage anthropologists' minds more readily since formality and routine is something anthropologists are apt in dealing with. Such analyses hide, or deflect from, individually felt emotions of bereavement and their personal and socio-cultural expressions. Overlooking (or in the case of Durkheim, negating) grief as an elemental part of death is thus a by-product of the anthropological focus on ritual. For Rosaldo, ritual does not illuminate that 'the work of grieving, probably universally, occurs both within obligatory ritual acts and in more everyday settings where people find themselves alone or with close kin' (1996[1984], 492). He postulates that rather 'than speaking of death in general, one must consider the subject's position within a field of social relations in order to grasp one's emotional experience' (ibid.).

What I am particularly concerned with is the tension between social requirement and personal engagement, a tension that seems to be inherent in both, actual mortuary

solemnity and a serious demeanour – and always without tears. For an account of crying transcending grief see Miceli and Castelfranchi (2003).

rituals and anthropological analyses thereof. I will discuss this tension in regard to sorry by examining two aspects of it, wailing as an expression of grief, and sexual joking.

Jackson views the role of grief in Warlpiri mortuary rituals thus:

Cutting or gashing oneself, sitting in sorry camp, abstaining from speech, covered with dust, unable to fend for oneself, are all powerful metaphors for mourning. The sorrow felt within is shown without, and if it is not then people of your moiety [...] will abuse and wound you until appearance satisfies the demands of social reality. The question of whether or not such emotions are “genuine” does not arise. This is because the social reality of death is considered more significant than the personal experience of the bereaved (Jackson 1995, 129–30).

I have never witnessed pressure being exerted in such a way, and while I agree that the question of ‘genuine-ness’ does not arise, I would add that the reason it does not arise is that people are so very aware of the intensity of grief felt by those most affected. In this regard, I agree with Bloch, who argues that social and personal grief complement each other through their ritualized expressions:

At death people weep and should be sad: visitors before and after the death come to weep with the bereaved. Indeed, the behaviour of the mourners is often dramatic in its intensity. It is quite clear that this socially-organised sorrow usually matches emotions which to those concerned appear as internal and uninstitutionally triggered. The Merina do not make the opposition which is common in European cultures between genuine individual feelings and artificial institutionalised expressions of feeling. For them the two are complementary (Bloch 1982, 214).

Warlpiri grief certainly is socially constructed in that its expressions are gendered and kin-centric, taking the form of tears, wailing, self-harm, and so forth. However, grief is not only something ritually expressed, it is, as Myers puts it, ‘a powerful emotion, a real shaking of the foundations, an intimation of mortality’ (1979, 358). Contra Jackson, I would postulate that the ritualized nature of expressions of grief by no means implies that personal grief is less significant (or, less recognized) than the social

expression thereof. Rather, and along the lines proposed by Bloch, the two complementary forms of grief are united in sorry.

This is most clearly demonstrated in the different performances of individuals at different sorry businesses. Since most sorry businesses involve hundreds of participants it can safely be assumed that not all of them were personally close to the deceased and mourn the death with equal intensity. As Myers says, grief is

Rooted in social relations, generated by loss or threat of loss of some related other and represented as a loss of part of oneself. Such “grief” is expressed by wailing at the news of a death as well as through a set of expected self-inflicted injuries, such as gashing the head or stabbing the thigh. These injuries and the marks they leave, appropriate to the kinship relationship one has to the dead, represent the inscribing of the body social onto the individual. People like to recount the origin of each mark (Myers 1986, 117).

In this fashion, the personal degree of grief changes from one sorry to the next, so that peripheral mourners from one sorry, depending on who passes away and how they are related to them, might be central mourners in the next. Accordingly, individual expressions of grief vary in form and in strength from one sorry to another. A woman will gash open her head, even cut off a finger joint, shave off her hair and spend weeks or months living in a sorry camp in one instance, and only tokenistically pretend to hit herself in the next – expressing a grief, the intensity of which is relational to her relationship to the deceased.

A paramount feature of sorry is providing support to those who are most affected by a death. Their wails and tears are absorbed into everybody else’s wails and tears, not to negate their validity but to express *marlpa*, company, – a fundamental sentiment underlying Warlpiri sociality (see Musharbash 2003). This understanding becomes clearer still when looking at what happens in sorry camps. Many times during the night people in the sorry camp are woken by a piercing wail from one of the main bereaved

women, and, upon awakening, the other women will join in that wail. The wailing will grow in strength and volume, and ebb and flow the way Warlpiri wailing does, until it slowly dies into further and further interspersed single wails by fewer and fewer voices. When the woman who started the wailing falls asleep again, the rest of the camp follows, until the process is repeated. It is easy to co-wail when awoken by the wailing of a Warlpiri woman who has just lost somebody close as those wails are most desperate expressions of intensely felt torment, agony and distress. Co-wailing often is as heartfelt as the original piercing wail because even if one felt less pain about the particular death, it hurts one to hear the pain of a woman one is close to. Whether heartfelt or ritualized, co-wailing is a requirement of expressing *marlpa*, company. In the sorry camps other women wail after one of the central mourning women starts her wails, not only because they are reminded of their shared loss, but also to remind the bereaved woman that she is not alone. Her agony over the loss remains the same but living through it is easier if there is *marlpa*. Indeed, answering a wail with silence is an impossibility – a single wail that goes out into the night without being joined is not imaginable and the isolation the wailing woman would feel would make her grief unbearable indeed.

Belonging and support are certainly reinforced in sorry business, yet, especially in large sorry businesses, this process is taken to another level as sorry provides a forum for people (who travelled considerable distances to attend, and might only know each other fleetingly or by name rather than in person) to meet. And, since sorry involves such large numbers of participants, apart from providing a forum for grieving and coming to terms with death, it allows for the expression of quite different emotions (such as the anger referred to earlier).

Sorry is a public ritual, one the few occasions where Warlpiri men and women are involved in doing the same thing at the same place and time. Yet, despite the continual ritual unification of spatially opposed groups into one, gender divisions are maintained throughout (for example, by gendered styles of approach, body decoration, wailing, self-injury, and so forth). This means that while everybody performs the ritual simultaneously on the same sorry ground, each gender has its own 'space', adding a definite undercurrent of sexuality. People are visible at sorry, they check each other out, and they monitor what goes on 'on the other side'. Accordingly, one element open to people other than the main bereaved individuals, is sexual joking. To give some examples: when self-applying the dull white ochre for sorry, for example, too zealous women will be teased: 'what? You looking for husband?' The joke is playing on the inversion of the 'love magic' potency of other ritual body designs. To tease a woman like that implies that she tries to be noticed during sorry and that the dull self-employed sorry ochre has exactly the opposite qualities to the 'love magic' she is accused of infusing it with. The high occurrence of jokes of this kind during sorry substantiates the conscious play with the metaphoric qualities of ritual symbolism and the fact that joking indeed has its place within sorry. A second example of this is the atmosphere not only of mourning but also of joking when driving to sorry business in a distant settlement. Participating in sorry may involve travelling distances spanning more than 1000 kilometres return, and generally convoys of cars and trucks undertake the journey together. Cars full of classificatory husbands will stop and invite cars full of classificatory wives for a quick interlude – not to be taken up, of course, but always occasioning bouts of raucous laughter and recounted for weeks afterwards. And during the actual performance of the ritual, multiple comments to 'the other side' are made.

Frequently, a woman interrupts her wail for a comment like ‘look that one there’ or, ‘look, all the Japanangka are watching us’, practices that are mirrored on the men’s side of the sorry ground.

Sorry business is a big event occurring often but irregularly, interrupting the monotony of day-to-day life. As a complex ritual, it allows for multiple levels of action as well as multiple levels of symbolism. Sorry provides people who were close to the deceased with a forum to express their grief, and to have those expressions mirrored by those who are there to provide *marlpa*. It is an occasion for both conflict and conflict resolution. It also is a big event creating a ‘buzz’. Underlying the structured performance of sorry there is scope for play with sexual tension not least because these days, sorry businesses are such large-scale events. Resulting from this, sorry is an opportunity for much sexual joking, flirtation, and animation. In sorry business, as in everyday life, individuals follow both their personal motives and social obligations.

Conclusion

The separation between everyday life and mortuary ritual is not as defined as the spatio-temporal enactment of sorry might imply. Warlpiri people say ‘too much sorry all the time’ – reflecting sentiments of being in mourning too often, and of death having become a part of everyday life. The sheer amount of deaths and the endless recurrence of sorry mean that Warlpiri people are not dealing with the idea of death as an abstract threat to being. Death is real and incessant. At Yuendumu today, sorry business relentlessly impacts on Warlpiri lives, emotionally, physically, residentially, financially, and temporally. The wide travels undertaken for sorry, the changes in residential patterns due to avoidance, the frequent periods of residency in sorry camps, the large amounts of money necessary for sorry payments and travel, the fact that hardly any

Warlpiri woman manages to grow her hair long, that adult Warlpiri bodies are marked by great numbers of grieving scars, all signify that contemporary Warlpiri people's lives and bodies are constantly being shaped and reshaped by death.

It is evident that with the more recent catastrophic increase in deaths, a significant transformation in ritual emphasis has occurred amongst Warlpiri people at Yuendumu and surrounding settlements since Meggitt's and Peterson's fieldwork in the 50s and 70s. The earlier ritual preoccupation with fertility now is overshadowed by the contemporary prevalence of death. Today, sorry is by far the most frequently performed Warlpiri ritual. Moreover, sorry is like a negative image of other Warlpiri ritual, not being about fertility, but about death. Other rituals involve songs and dances that are passed on and need to be learned and guarded. There is no song in sorry, and no dance. There are no beautiful patterns applied to one's body by others in shiny different coloured ochres, there is only the haphazardly self-applied, dull, white ochre. There are no restrictions in regard to participation, no knowledge to be gained, no status to be achieved. Sorry is truly public, and among many other things this means that contemporary Warlpiri teenagers will have participated in sorry much more often than in other ritual. Sorry is the one Warlpiri ritual they know best. This also means that the current generation of young Warlpiri people grow up with an entirely different experience of life and the world – and hence outlook – than those people with whom Meggitt and Peterson worked. For these teenagers, 'sorry business truly is Yapa way'.

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